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AUTHOR Awa, Njoku E.; Crowder, L. Van, Jr.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the theory of linguistic relativity, tracing the historical roots, as well as contemporary formulations of the notion that languages shape thought and percetpion in different ways. Implications are then considered for intercultural communication and communication research. A bibliography is appended. (AA)

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LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY REVISITED

by

Njoku E. Awa

and

L. Van Crowder, Jr.

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Department of Communication Arts

Cornell University

Ithaca, New York

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Introduction

The term "linguistic relativity" is usually associated with theories of language proposed by Banjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), an American ethnolinguist. An authority on American Indian languages, Whorf maintained that language is not simply a way of expressing thought or a means of communication but is also a mold that shapes thought. In Whorf's view, the world or reality can be perceived and interpreted in many ways, and the language we learn from birth directs the distinct way we view and structure it.

This linguistic theory, which since its formulation has been both influential and controversial in the social sciences, is embodied in the Whorfian position that

> each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but it is a part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of

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*Njoku E. Awa is Assistant Professor of Communication at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. L. Van Crowder, Jr. is a Research Aide in the Department of Communication Arts, Cornell University.

> phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds -- and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way -- an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.
> (Whorf, 1956: 212-214)

Whorf posits two propositions regarding language and cognition. The first maintains that the world is perceived and experienced distinctly in different language communities, while the second makes a causal inference between language and cognition: the language of a community shapes the cognitive structure of its users. The interaction between language and cognition is viewed as being essentially unidirectional, with language structuring thought. This latter conception has been termed "linguistic determinism."

The Whorfian position is that language is not merely an instrument for coding and transmitting perceptions and cognitions for its speakers, but also the "shaper" of both. For Whorf, the structure of a language (which is inseparable from its semantic system) is not only reflective of cultural thought but directive of individual thought, and consequently behavior.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: to review the theory of linguistic relativity in perspective and to reflect on its implications for intercultural communication--theory and practice.

Historical Perspective

The notion of linguistic relativity is not entirely original with Whorf. Indeed, the linguistic relativity theory is often termed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as the initial formulation can be found in Sapir's (1929) article:

> Language is a guide to "social reality". Though language is not ordinarily thought of as of interest to the students of social science, it powerfully conditions all of our thinking about social problems and processes. Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.
>
> (quoted in Mandelbaum, 1949: 162)

Many years in advance of both Sapir and Whorf, the German philosopher-linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) had noted that "man lives with the world about him principally, indeed...exclusively, as language presents it to him" (Waterman, 1970: 67). In a synopsis of Humboldt's position, Waterman (ibid.) indicates that language is viewed not as a thing but as activity, "the active formative force of the intellect." Consequently, "in order to understand a culture...it is first necessary to determine how the living power of the word has shaped a people's construct of the world about them."

In a review of Herderian linguistics and the direction given to language as "constituting cultural identity," Hymes (1974: 122) refers to Humboldt as the "most celebrated early figure in that linguistic tradition."

Humboldt's theoretical position, which was later expanded by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), influenced the work of European linguists and led to the approach known as "linguistic field-theory." According to Waterman (1970), Humboldt defined language as a function, an activity that shapes a people's world view. Saussure proposed a method for investigating function and form in language. He emphasized the importance of viewing

language as a living phenomenon with an underlying structure or Gestalt that could best be studied in its social context. Saussure stressed the distinction between "parole," or utterance, and "la langue." By definition, "langue" is a social phenomenon incorporating only features common to all members of a given community--an abstract coding system (historic and evolutionary in nature), constructed, in a sense, from the personal "paroles" of all indigenous speakers. Furthermore, language is seen as constituting a value system limited to the society of which it is a part, and only able to be studied withir the framework of the societal structure which governs those values.

A group of European scholars (e.g., Walter Prozig, Jost Trier, Leo Weisgerber, Ernst Cassirer) elaborated these ideas and developed procedures for establishing the "linguistic field." The American counterparts to this structural approach can be found in the descriptivist techniques set forth by Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Bejamin Whorf.

Greenberg (1956: 4) also discusses the similarly oriented approaches of American and European scholars, but points to what he terms a "characteristic difference which lies in the sphere of value judgments." In his opinion, European scholars, with some exceptions, "have taken a view of primitive mentality similar to that of Levy-Bruhl. The world perspective stated to be revealed shows the primitive at an early prelogical state of development. In the United States an equality of valuation is maintained, the scale, if anything, tending to weigh in favor of the primitive. (See, e.g., Whorf, 1952: 31, and Lee, 1940)." While some might question the "equality of valuation" of this statement, our purpose here is not to defend or refute it, but rather to get at the concept of "primitive mentality" as it relates to a historical perspective of linguistic relativity.

The view that the thought processes of primitive peoples are

different from and inferior to those of Europeans had its roots in the influential writings of Herbert Spencer, a leading intellectual figure between 1850 and 1900. Spencer's analysis of the intellects of non-Western peoples resulted in his identification of so-called "deficiencies". One of these involved the notion that primitives think like children, an idea further promulgated by anthropologist E.B. Taylor, who viewd the imagination of non-literate people as resembling that of European children. In America, psychologist G. Stanley Hall used a similar line of reasoning to support the idea that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny"; that is, a child's development goes through stages analogous to those of the human race in its evolutionary development.

In general, these "theories" concerning the minds of primitives were supported by the evolutionary orientation of 19th century scholars, who, guided by the law of biogenesis and the assumed supremacy of some cultural and racial entities, characteristically placed Western society at the top of the evolutionary scale. This same interpretation was applied to linguistic classifications, the "primitive" or "simple" languages being ranked as qualitatively inferior to European languages.

In a sociological account which relied heavily on the work and procedures of Spencer, Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1910) claimed that the primitive mentality was "prelogical". It should be noted, however, that the procedures for investigating primitives were usually the published reports of missionaries and colonial officials in various "out-regions" of the world. (In a period of intense European colonial expansion such conceptualizations of non-Western peoples were obviously advantageous).

The classic negation of this theory of primitive mentality was made by Franz Boas in 1911 in The Mind of Primitive Man, in which he questioned

Levy-Bruhl's evidence. Equally critical was the English psychologist Sir Frederick Bartlett, who considered it erroneous to compare primitive thought with Western "scientific" thought and asserted that within his own environment primitive man "is as capable of learning from experience as the most cultivated of our contemporaries" (Bartlett, 1923: 284-285).

More recently the work of anthropoligist Claude Levi-Strauss (1963, 1966) has explicitly disclaimed the position that there are higher and lower levels of mental development that are racially and culturally based. Levi-Strauss contends that there are no differences in cognitive processes across cultures and that Western scientific thinking merely reflects one attempt by which man tries to make sense out of his reality. All men seek to make sense out of the reality they encounter by classifying and ordering information. Levi-Strauss argues that while traditional cultures may group and classify objects or events differently from the way modern industrialized societies do, all classifications are the result of the same cognitive processes of abstraction and generalization. Therefore, while ethnological content differs from one culture to another, there are still common human operations or in a sense cognitive universals.

It is generally accepted today that there is not a "most logical" language or "more complex" structure. As Sapir pointed out, every known language has enough sounds, structure and vocabulary for its own purposes; all languages while differing from culture to culture, are fully developed to deal with the needs of their respective speech communities. And even if one believes that a particular culture is primitive (in anthropological terms), this is not evidence that its language is also primitive. Actually, there is no cultural, racial or biological basis for reasoning that there is such a thing as the primitive mind, "rich in archetypal images and

stupid superstitions, and manifestly inferior to the civilized, scientific, abstractionistic mind. Nor is there any valid dichotomy between a primitive, concrete, handicapped language used by benighted savages, and any of the rich, subtle, expressive, artistic and technical languages used by people who have been educated in big cities" (Landar, 1966: 83).

Contemporary Views

As previously indicated, the Whorfian hypothesis involves two suppositions: (1) different linguistic communities perceive reality in different ways, and (2) the language of a community helps to shape the cognitive structure of its native speakers. Cole and Scribner (1974: 41) observe that the second proposition (linguistic determinism) transcends the issue of cultural differences in thought and focuses on a central problem in psychology:

> The question-which is primary, language or conceptual thought? --has historically been, and to this day remains, one of the most controversial issues in psychology and one that has involved the world's leading developmental psychologists in theoretical combat.

Dance and Larson (1976: 100) deal with this disputed relationship between language and congitive processes. These communication theorists argue that "speech communication plays a functional (integral and indispensable) role in the development of higher mental processes."

In their theory, qualitative distinctions are maintained among the triplets--speech, language, and speech communication. Speech is defined as a genetically determined ability, the capacity for which is built into the human organism as a part of his genetic code and heritage. Unlike speech, which is genetically determined, language is culturally determined, and the human child "is dependent upon the presence of a societal context and the development of learning, as well as maturation, for its acquisition"

(Dance and Larson, 1976: 102).

In this conceptualization, speech communication, or "spoken symbolic interaction," occurs when the child's speech begins to interact with the language of the surrounding culture. It is speech communication which "announces the presence of higher mental processes, including thought" (Dance and Larson, 1976: 102).

At an early, preschool stage in the maturation process the child is generally ill equipped for differentiating between private self-coding of events (inner speech) and coding for others (external speech communication). That is, all of the child's speech at this stage is at once private and public, "with no real differentiation between self-coding and coding for others" (Flavell et al., 1968: 20). With further development, however, the two patterns gradually diverge, with inner speech remaining covert and condensed and external speech becoming a syntactic elaboration and articulation of the private version.

To be sure, inner speech is a special form of verbal coding, characterized by silence, syntactic abbreviation or condensation and synthesized meaning. Inner speech is further characterized by the absence of sentence subjects and a preponderance of predicates. Thus, as Flavell and others (1968: 20) have stated, the inner speech equivalent of the sentence, "I guess I'll go there tomorrow" might be "go tomorrow" or simply "tomorrow", because the subject is understood and the meaning of the sentence is embedded in one or more parts of the predicate. And according to Vygotsky (1962: 145) every word in inner speech "is so saturated with sense that many words would be required to explain it in external speech."

Dance and Larson (1976: 106), while concurring with Vygotsky (1962), contend that around age 5, the human child internalizes external speech communication. According to them,

> this stage, which marks the necessary acquisition of inner speech communication, also marks the completion of the formative stages of speech communication in a child. Henceforth the task becomes one not of development or maturation but of refinement and of sophistication. This final development stage of internalization gives children a hitherto unavailable control of their higher mental processes, since it allows them to represent external reality internally, to manipulate fantasy, and to engage in higher mental processes in the absence of the specific external stimuli that match their internal thoughts.

Dance and Larson (1976: 103) further contend that language of itself does not account for the "development, expansion, or potentiation of higher mental processes," and that language has no existence except as it is incorporated in the interactions of individuals; by itself, language "may be so opaque as to be incomprehensible and thus irrelevant to a given person's higher mental processes."

By linking the concept of speech communication to the concepts of speech and language, it is possible, according to the Dance and Larson scheme of things, to consider a language/thought relationship posited on both a genetic and a cultural base. Essentially, these authors are arguing for a symbiotic relationship between speech communication and cognition. Language, as a distinct concept, does affect thought, but language differences "do not result in total differences in thought processes or patterns, since such processes and patterns are also related to levels of existential reality subserving the cultural language--levels such as neurophysiological functioning, perceptual adequacy, and similarity of external physical stimuli across cultures and language boundaries" (Dance and Larson, 1972: 79).

This is, in essence, similar to the argument put forth by Levi-Strauss that there are significant similarities between individuals the world over in both the cognitive and behavioral domains. Clearly all of mankind

possesses an innate language capacity, and some linguists would offer evidence for a "universality" of man that is revealed even in language structure.

G.A. Miller (1970) has identified various features of phonology, grammar, and lexicon that all languages seem to have in common. He contends that these commonalities or "general design features" of language are indicative of physiological and psychological processes or capacities shared by all people. Chomsky (1965, 1968) and others contend that children from birth are biologically capable of making well-formed utterances in conformity to the language spoken around them but are not confined to mere repetition. From earliest childhood, individuals seem to abstract data from the language they hear, such that by the ages of six to eight a child has abstracted rules of his language and is capable of rearranging and producing sentences never heard before.

Condon (1975: 32) summarizes the implications of Chomsky's reasoning: "If one is learning primarily learning principles, and if these underlying principles seem to be either similar or at least interchangeable in all languages all over the world, why should we assume that our language or language habits influence the way we think and act?"

Although many linguists agree that the notions implicit in transformational-generative grammar have some merit, the issues related to the language-thought relationship have not been resolved. Cole and Scribner (1974: 58) point out that while it "may be relatively simple to identify the basic mechanisms accounting for universal features in phonology (the limited variety of articulates possible to human speech apparatus, for example), it is another matter entirely to identify the psychological processes that might account for universals in grammar and lexicon."

Condon and Yousef (1975) draw a continuum between what they view as

the opposing approaches of linguistic determinism and language irrelevancy. The two opposing "camps" are characterized by (1) those who deny the deterministic hold that language has on thought and base their denial on analysis made below the surface variances of language and (2) those who support the extreme version of linguistic determinism (i.e., view language as the predominant influence in perception and thought) and accumulate evidence at the surface level of language.

In general, neither the first nor the second proposition of the Whorfian hypothesis has been established by research evidence. Clearly there are many differences between languages--in vocabulary, syntax, and phonological and morphological characteristics. There is also support for the contention that these differences relate to distinctive aspects of the cultures in which the different languages are spoken. Fishman (1970: 94), summarizing research on the Whorfian hypothesis, concludes that "no one has successfully predicted and demonstrated cognitive differences between two populations on the basis of the grammatical or structural differences between their languages". This conclusion is echoed by Cole and Scribner (1974), who also reviewed empirical research bearing on the hypothesis. They view as indefensible any strong version of linguistic relativity, that is, "those of Whorf's formulations that stress the arbitrary character of the language - experience relationship and the inescapable and rigid constraints imposed on cognitive processes by language" (p. 59).

Almost all contemporary writers on the subject recognize the distinction between the "weak" and "strong" versions of the Whorfian hypothesis, with many of them adopting the former. The weak form asserts that certain linguistic aspects can predispose a language group to think and act in a particular, perhaps peculiar, way. The implication is that language is a

guide to thought and behavior (Slobin, 1971) and to social reality (Sapir, 1921).

There seems to be little debate today about the relative validity of the weak version of the Whorfian hypothesis, and all contemporary writers on the subject think there is need for further investigation. Slobin (1971) says that language is a guide to thought and behavior and that one is not altogether "a prisoner of one's language." Cole and Scribner (1974: 59) view as untenable the proposition that language is a rigid, if not an inescapable, constraint on cognitive processes. They do indicate that language has a "filtering effect" on perception and state that this is greatest in such concepts as social roles, ideology, and/or theoretical work, "where concepts largely acquire their meanings through their being embedded" in culture-specific, explanatory verbal networks. Taylor (1976) also accepts the shallow version of the linguistic relativity principle; he feels, however, that language may not be quite as influential as schooling in shaping one's world view or thought structure.

In a series of investigations into affective meaning systems--spanning 13 years and involving 25 language/cultural communities--Osgood (1974) found semantic similarities in the ways in which some concepts are used in the communities he sampled. But Osgood's findings do not disprove all of Whorf's views on language and cognition. For example, he found significant cultural differences in the meanings evoked by his "Affiliative-Achievement" or Love-Power scale. Japanese teenagers proved to be the most achievement-oriented subjects and Mexican teenagers the most love-oriented ones. Similar differences were found in the "Moral - Polarization" (moral-immoral) category among the most puritanical cultures (Afghans and Lebanese), average tolerators of moral deviancy (Americans) and the lowest polarizers or cynics (the French). In fact, Osgood has demonstrated that there are

cultural "universals, sub-universals, and uniquenesses" in terms of color terminology and the affective meaning attributed to color by different language groups. According to him, these sub-universals and uniquenesses represent "real cultural differences," and it is not unlikely that these may have a bearing on the way in which different languages categorize and label socio-cultural phenomena for their users.

In the realm of food, one of the adjectives used in eliciting affective response is "hot," which in English may refer to temperature or to the "spicy flavor of chili pepper" (Taylor, 1976). For monolingual speakers of Ibo (a Nigerian language) the word "hot" is used mainly for temperature; burning sensations produced by pungent condiments are labeled differently. While such a linguistic difference may not necessarily result in a difference in world views between English- and Ibo-speaking peoples, there are other kinds of linguistic differences that might affect the way in which different languages categorize social reality for their speakers. For example, there is no term for "racism" in Ibo, nor is there an accurate one-word equivalent, that is, a word capable of evoking from a monolingual Ibo the emotional response that the word "racism" might elicit in South Africa, North America, and some parts of Europe.

The fact remains, however, that lexical naming of social and other phenomena can sharpen perception or hide reality for a language community. In the U.S., for example, the distinctions between cucumbers and pickles and between plums and prunes are often hard for children to make, as the biological sameness of each pair is confounded by technical (cultural) names. By the same line of reasoning, names such as cucumber and pickles actually function to prime children to making appropriate cognitive responses within their cultural milieu.

Conclusion

Language is essentially a social institution, consisting of a system of arbitrary symbols. Like most social phenomena, languages differ in some aspects of their structure. There are important resemblances, however, among all known languages, stemming from the fact that all cultures are structured around common biological, psychological and social characteristics. All humans have the same basic emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust (Ekman, 1971).

It is not surprising that languages should have commonalities in their terms and in the rules that govern those terms. By the same token, there are many reasons why there should be language differences as well as universals. One particular language may have terms that reflect distinct dimensions of the physical or social environment. Bernstein (1972), writing about the English language and the way it categorizes reality, identifies different terms of speech which characterize the English working and middle classes; he suggests that these differences may have a bearing on the learning experiences of the two classes.

Language may interact with its speakers' cultural experience so as to predispose them to make certain distinctions and minimize others. Language is a tool, and just like any other tool, it limits its users in some respects but not in the deterministic sense which the strong version of the Whorfian hypothesis implies.

In the realm of intercultural communication, language and cultural differences tend sometimes to give "flavor" to interaction. This is why linguistic/cultural differences and similarities must continue to co-exist. Despite this, there are "emic" and "etic" characteristics that need to be

delineated in order for us to deepen our understanding of the influence of language and culture on "world views."

Osgood's (1974) lead in tapping basic dimensions of values, feelings and semantic meaning across languages ought to be commended and emulated. There are some serious limitations in Osgood's studies, however. For one thing, he deals with subjective culture--affective meanings evoked by such stimuli as "white" and "black". For another thing, his sample of cultural/language communities does not include China, where the color of mourning is white and not black as in Western cultures (Hockett, 1973). Also in some cultures there is no association whatsoever between color and mourning (ibid). It need hardly be stated that knowledge of these types of culture-specific "world views" can yield fruitful results in our continuing effort to expand, refine and explicate the principles of linguistic relativity postulated by our intellectual ancestors.

Research continues to reveal complex interrelations between language culture, and thought. And our understanding of these interrelations will be expanded as cross-cultural research elucidates the cultural/linguistic universals, sub-universals, and uniqueness.

Notwithstanding these conceptual problems, Hoijer (1971: 94) indicates that:

> The languages of human beings do not so much determine the perceptual and other faculties of their speakers vis-a-vis experience as they influence and direct their faculties into prescribed channels. Intercultural communication, however wide the differences between cultures may be, is not impossible. It is simply more or less difficult, depending on the degree of difference between the cultures concerned.

At the theoretical level there is much that should interest us as intercultural scholars and researchers in the controversy about linguistic determinants of thought and behavior. Aside from raising specific research questions, there are implications which have a bearing on our own research

methodologies and the interpretation of cross-cultural data. All too frequently we transplant culturally-biased concepts about human cognition and behavior without regard for the different conditions in the culture under study. And as Brislin, Lonner and Thorndike (1973: 12) have pointed out, "meanings" are important for cross-cultural work "since the researcher does not know the meaning that people of other cultures attach to our research process."

At the level of practice the questions raised by linguistic relativity may be even more important. Considerations of linguistic relativity and other related issues can "key" us to differences as well as similarities in human behavior. While it is important to recognize that language and cultural differences can influence intercultural transactions, it is equally important to realize that it is people with similar basic aspirations and perhaps even the same basic perceptual-cognitive capacities that communicate. More than language acquisition, it is learning the value orientations which underlie a people's spoken language which will help us understand their culture. And at times the silences we observe may be "saying" more than words ever could.

In learning about other cultural values and in attempting to foster intercultural understanding, the goal should not be to discover a "universal culture" appropriate to all people. Even as we come to realize our basic similarities as human beings, we need not abandon our cultural uniquenesses. Ethnocentrism and language/cultural uniquenesses do serve the important function of helping a people cope with the distinct social and environmental conditions of their community. For most people, their own culture is still the one against which they measure all others and rightly so. We should, nevertheless, be alert to our cultural and linguistic conditioning and how it can affect our communication behavior in intercultural arenas.

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